

If a human tree falls, the show goes on; Bentway presenting 'Woods,' which features a forestlike landscape to make a point about climate

The Toronto Star
May 25, 2023 Thursday
ONT Edition

Copyright 2023 Toronto Star Newspapers Ltd. All Rights Reserved

Section: CU; Pg. C2

Length: 1350 words

Byline: Michael Crabb Special to the Star

Body

Art and environmentalism meet this weekend in a unique Bentway presentation that turns the world upside down; well, not the whole world exactly but a 40-member cast of mostly amateur, locally recruited performers willing to stand on their heads for as long as they can with their upper bodies shrouded in flowing skirts to create a forestlike landscape growing out of rock-hard concrete.

The Bentway, a not-for-profit organization committed to reimagining urban spaces, most particularly the lands beneath the Gardiner Expressway between Bathurst and Strachan, is presenting the North American premiere of "Woods." It's a category- and gender-blurring human art installation of flexible duration that while intriguing to watch prompts reflection on the relationship between people and nature.

It is a reminder of how a misconception of our relationship to nature has led to the despoiling of forests and devastating climate change.

"Woods" is the final iteration of a project initiated more than a decade ago as an experimental photographic exhibit featuring São Paulo-based Brazilian artist Clarice Lima doing a headstand in a large skirt. The next phase of development was a live outdoor group performance.

Headstands can only be held for so long. Thus, as each headstand collapsed it symbolized the felling of a tree. The fact that these were human bodies underlined Lima's insistent point, inspired by Indigenous teachings.

"Nature is not separate from us," Lima said. "It's not just that nature is useful to us. We are nature."

This second iteration garnered lots of attention and toured widely.

"We did it about a hundred times with a total of 2,000 local participants," Lima explained.

The work's success elicited an invitation from a European alliance of dance festivals for a large outdoor performance that would engage local participants. In collaboration with Portugal's Catarina Saraiva as dramaturge, and fellow Brazilian Aline Bonamin and Slovenia's Nina Fajdiga as movement assistants and performers, "Woods" assumed its present form ... almost.

Lima wanted 40 performers the better to evoke the visual impression of a forest.

If a human tree falls, the show goes on; Bentway presenting 'Woods,' which features a forestlike landscape to make a point about climate

It was a challenge the Bentway staff were happy to take on. They put the call out far and wide through community centres, yoga establishments, libraries and social media to reach the broadest possible demographic. Anna Gallagher-Ross, the Bentway's senior manager of programming, said the strategy paid off.

"Our goal was to reach non-professional artists because this is a call to action, a call to people to join us in standing up for climate action."

Even so, it's no surprise that a physical work like "Woods" would appeal to dancers such as friends and professional colleagues Alison Carry and Marina Robinson, both in their early 20s.

"We're contemporary dancers and we've done headstands before," Carry said. "The challenge here is more mental than physical."

Carry is curious to see how the flowing skirts that effectively become enclosing tents during a headstand will affect her sense of balance, which relies a lot on visual orientation.

Jonathan Wilson, a just-turned 23-year-old recent graduate of Wilfrid Laurier University with a major in UX (user experience) design, candidly admitted that the \$500 honorarium the Bentway is offering participants was a not-inconsiderable incentive.

"I thought, 500 bucks for 30 seconds, not bad," Wilson said. Except, as he soon discovered, the honorarium covers two lengthy workshop/rehearsal sessions as well as the four performances. The Baltimore-born long-time Scarborough native is looking forward to his first public performance, despite having no prior experience with headstands.

"I taught myself in three days from TikTok and YouTube shorts so I could hold a headstand for 30 seconds for the audition video," Wilson said.

After some practice, he's now up to 21/2 minutes.

At age 69, Steve Seider is the oldest participant. He's followed the Bentway's activities since attending a music event there a few years ago. When he learned about "Woods," Seider thought it would be a fun thing to do. Naturally, he got his wife's approval and was curious to see if his three adult children might want to be involved. No takers there.

Seider, who was born and raised in South Africa and has founded several tech startups in Canada, comes to "Woods" with a decided advantage. In his youth, he was a competitive gymnast, where having a keen sense of balance is crucial.

"I'm very active and love the outdoors," Seider said. "Even so, I don't think I'd done a headstand in maybe 30 years or more. But I guess the muscle memory kicked in. I didn't find it that hard to stay up. Still, I am a little concerned about the compression on the neck. I'm not a young man so I'm saving myself for the event. I'm not going to waste myself on practising."

Lima has modified the choreography to allow participants to resume a headstand and even move their legs while they're up. This lessens the stress of trying to hit duration targets and is more evocative of a living forest. Her two professional associates can maintain headstands for as long as 25 minutes so there will never be a point where the whole forest collapses.

If a human tree falls, the show goes on; Bentway presenting 'Woods,' which features a forestlike landscape to make a point about climate

Said Lima: "We came to understand that what's beautiful in a forest is the movement inside. So now people can go up and go down and go up again. We take the idea from permaculture. Something dies and something can be born again. Nature is teaching us."

With 37 local performers and two professional assistants, Lima has almost achieved her numerical goal. Although it began in 2010 with Lima doing a solo headstand, she admitted she's really not that good at them and prefers to be an observer.

"I really enjoy watching because people cannot see through the skirts and there is this kind of choreography that happens during the performance that we cannot predict or control."

Even so, Lima said she's tempted to join in this time to hit her 40-tree target; although it's not just about the numbers.

"It's this idea of the strength of the collective," Lima said. "If we can gather so many people for an artistic project imagine what else can we achieve when we come together."

Bamboo sculpture, aliens and more at the Bentway

"Woods" is just one of a number of complementary Bentway 2023 summer season offerings assembled under the thematic banner "Beyond Concrete."

"The Gardiner is so much more than the concrete, traffic, and debates we've become used to," said Anna Gallagher-Ross. "We're excited to be working with artists from Toronto and around the world to consider, in the midst of a rapidly changing climate, the ways in which urban nature and the built environment can co-exist, entangle, even collaborate."

The most spectacular component, available for viewing 24/7 until Sept. 24, is Filipino artist Leeroy New's huge otherworldly sculpture "Balete Bulate Bituka." Shaped by a twisting, elongated framework of 8,500 pounds of bamboo, New's first North American commission incorporates hundreds of pieces of locally sourced plastic waste as well as living plants. The work acts as a powerful reminder of the entangled relationship between nature and the human urban environment, and of the role of consumer culture in climate change.

In an outwardly playful vein, New is also presenting "The Aliens of Manila," an animated art installation featuring 10 local dancers, directed and choreographed by Toronto ballroom maven Danah Rosales. Each performer will be encased in costumes constructed by New from discarded plastics, personally moulded by the artist to fit the variety of body types. Again, it's a reminder of how human waste is despoiling the planet but, for New, it's also a symbolic metaphor for the plight of overseas Filipino workers, often hidden and, when no longer useful, dispensable.

"The Aliens of Manila" will be presented at the Bentway's opening night bash Friday and again later in the season at a date yet to be announced.

"Woods" is at the Bentway

Skate Trail, 250 Fort York Blvd., Saturday and Sunday at 1:30

and 3:30 p.m. See thebentway.ca for information.

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

If a human tree falls, the show goes on; Bentway presenting 'Woods,' which features a forestlike landscape to make a point about climate

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Subject: ARTISTS & PERFORMERS (90%); DANCE (89%); DANCERS (89%); VISUAL ARTISTS (79%); VISUAL ARTS (79%); ENVIRONMENT & NATURAL RESOURCES (78%); ENVIRONMENTALISM (78%); ASSOCIATIONS & ORGANIZATIONS (77%); CLIMATE ACTION (76%); CLIMATE CHANGE (76%); FORESTS & WOODLANDS (76%); ARTS FESTIVALS & EXHIBITIONS (74%); DEMOGRAPHIC GROUPS (74%); PHOTOGRAPHY (74%); TRENDS & EVENTS (74%); NEGATIVE ENVIRONMENTAL NEWS (73%); NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS (71%); EXHIBITIONS (69%); YOGA (69%); THEATER & DRAMA (66%)

Industry: ARTISTS & PERFORMERS (90%); DANCERS (89%); VISUAL ARTISTS (79%); VISUAL ARTS (79%); ARTS FESTIVALS & EXHIBITIONS (74%); PHOTOGRAPHY (74%); EXHIBITIONS (69%)

Geographic: SAO PAULO, BRAZIL (79%); BRAZIL (91%); SLOVENIA (78%); PORTUGAL (53%)

Load-Date: May 25, 2023

End of Document